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Ordinary Time, Proper 15

August 15, 2021

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

Marinating in the Bread of Life

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Many good cooks know the magic of a marinade. A “marinade” is a savory sauce in which meat, fish or a vegetable is soaked to enrich its flavor and tenderize it. With meat, an acidic ingredient such as wine, vinegar or lemon juice breaks down the tough connective tissue on the surface. For perfect flavor penetration, the food often marinades for many hours.

And that’s exactly what we have been doing for the last several weeks in the gospel of John. Marinading. Soaking in the words of Jesus that form the very foundation of what we believe. Today is the fourth of five gospel readings known as the Bread of Life discourse. It is fitting our lectionary allows us these five weeks to slowly marinade in this discourse because the gospel writer himself had many years in which he, too, allowed the stories about Jesus to slowly soak in and refine the language of his gospel message. Believed to have been written around the year 90, long after Paul’s letters and the other gospels, John’s gospel is less about the what, where and when of Jesus and more about proclaiming *who Jesus really was*. Jesus was Man. Jesus is God. Fully human, fully divine. And if that isn’t mind-boggling enough, this fully Man fully God, this Christ desires to be in relationship with US. Desires to give us himself, the Bread of Life. Desires to hold on to us, to abide with us. And when we step out in faith by grace and open our hearts and minds, when we are willing to soak and be *marinated* in the richness of the mystery of Christ not only do we gain eternal life – we gain the confidence to proclaim this message with the same assurance as our gospel writer.

So let’s take a moment and retrace our steps. The Bread of Life discourse begins with a miraculous sign: the feeding of the five thousand. Note that John’s telling of this miracle is

succinct. It is not Jesus' miraculous powers John wants to focus on – that has been done already by Matthew, Mark and Luke. The miracle itself does not reveal who Jesus is, in fact, the people gathered mistakenly take it as a sign Jesus is a great prophet. The crowd, once fed, then crosses the Sea of Galilee and tracks Jesus down. They are hungry for showmanship that will also fill their bellies. The miracle is only a sign, though, that Jesus uses as a springboard to explain what real living bread is. As we have seen over the last several weeks, when Jesus instead focuses on spiritual nourishment, the crowd finds it hard to digest.

Jesus does not beat around the bush when he begins his discourse. I am the bread of God that comes down from heaven. I am the bread of life. I am the bread that gives life to the world. I AM. Do you hear it? Do you hear Jesus' claim to divinity and *relationship with God*, the great I AM who spoke to Moses in the burning bush? Do you hear the declaration that firmly asserts Jesus is more than a man from Galilee? Do you hear the superlative? Jesus' claims are bold and provocative. This passage is so confident, so self-focused, there is no denying the gauntlet Jesus has thrown. He is not a mere prophet, he is not a mere teacher. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse." "Let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher," Lewis wrote, "He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Jesus, as we know, has never had a reputation as a shrinking violet. Today's gospel is the climax of the Bread of Life discourse. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." What??? What IS Jesus saying? Did your brain immediately make a connection to the Eucharistic feast we are about to celebrate, the eating and drinking of Christ's Body and Blood, the memorial of his sacrifice for us? That would be a logical connection, although we know this discourse is placed in the middle of Jesus' ministry, John's gospel omits reference to the Last Supper, and Jesus uses the word "flesh," not body. So while this passage does indeed have Eucharistic overtones, something much more is being declared.

When Jesus offers himself as the Bread of Life, his flesh to eat, at least according to John, it is not limited to his offering of his life on the cross. Jesus is making a broader claim, a claim to his incarnation. What gives life to the world, what gives eternal life is Jesus' FLESH. The Word made flesh. "What has come into being in him was life," John wrote in the very first chapter of his gospel, and Jesus now affirms that life. He is God Incarnate. The Word made flesh.

Boom. Jesus has dropped the other shoe, claiming both divinity and humanity in all their fullness. It is not either or. He is not some strange creature with some human traits and some divine attributes. He is the Christ. Without his full humanity and full divinity, the cross has no meaning. I have this image of the gospel writer, pouring over and over, slowly marinating in Jesus' words and actions when the light bulb goes off. I have this image of him chuckling to himself, knowing the words he penned in the beginning of his gospel will come to life here in the middle. I have an image of his face, flushed with the joy of testifying to the one true Christ, Lord and God of all.

And with this Christ, comes the promise of abundance. The feeding of five thousand is extravagant in the extreme. The offer of his flesh and eternal life is first and foremost connected with abundant life here and now, not just the resurrection. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me, and I in them," Jesus says. This is the third startling revelation. Jesus, who claims an intimate relationship with the Father offers his flesh, his self, so that WE may share in the intimacy of that relationship.

This is incredible stuff, folks. This is – spoiler alert – what next week we will hear Jesus' disciples call a difficult teaching. These are words worth marinating in. Do we live as if we have forgotten the radicalness of what Jesus actually did and said? Do our practices and our imagination about our relationship with Christ have a domesticity about them? Do our day in and day out lives reflect a hunger for the promised abundance of the Bread of Life? I wonder, what our lives would look like if we really marinated in the identity of Christ revealed by Jesus in the Bread of Life discourse. Would the recitation of our Nicene Creed become more than a recitation? Would our outstretched hands when we receive communion tremble? Would we be able to let go of the worries and anxieties that keep us awake at night? Would each morning find us hungry for the extravagant abundance of the Bread of Life? I believe there may be only one way to find out. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.